

# **PROBLEMS IN GRAMMAR AND STRATEGIES BEING USED BY ARAB STUDENTS IN SPEAKING IN ENGLISH**

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**UNIVERSITI TEKNOLOGI MALAYSIA**

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**This project is submitted in partial fulfilment  
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**November, 2010**

First, this is dedicated to my Mother and Father, my beloved wife Hanan, and my children Sarah, Husam and Rawan, for their enduring love, encouragement and support. Second, this research project is to be presented to my country Libya for its financial support.

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Once again, another special thanks to my mother who always prays for me to pass my subjects and got the degree. Also, other thanks for the participants who have been involved in this project for their patience and their kind cooperation.

Not forgetting too, to all who have either directly or indirectly contributed to the accomplishment of this endeavour, they have my heartfelt thanks.

## **ABSTRACT**

This study is carried out with the objective to determine and define the problems faced by Arab students in speaking in English. This is a qualitative study which seeks to understand why some of Arab students who have studied English for more than eight months in different levels up to intermediate level still have mistakes and errors in grammar when they speak. Moreover, it also aims to investigate the different strategies being used by participants during conducting the interviews and the speaking tests. Twenty participants of Arab students in Universiti Teknologi Malaysia were chosen for the study. They were selected based on their experience of studying English courses. The instruments used for this study were interviews and speaking tests. The used of these two instruments were meant to act as a triangulation of data collection in ensuring better validity and reliability of the findings. Results of the study show that Arab students make errors and mistakes in grammar when speaking in English, such as subject verb agreement, English articles, prepositions, tenses and plurality in nouns. In addition, the other results indicate that Arab students use same strategies when they speak, such as self- correction, asking for clarifications, using mother tongue and repeating sentences. It is recommended that the findings would provide useful insights to Arab learners into the mistakes made when they speak in English. In addition, the teachers teaching English to Arab speaking students should be aware of these problems from the beginning. Also, this study can be used as a platform for syllabus designer of Arab speaking world to plan and prepare English language curriculum taking into account the speaking errors and mistakes made by the speakers. This is to ensure that Arab learners can easily overcome these problems if schools adapt certain methods for teaching speaking in English according to common and specific errors made by Arab students.

## ABSTRAK

Kajian ini dijalankan berdasarkan objektif untuk menentukan dan menafsirkan masalah-masalah yang dihadapi oleh pelajar-pelajar Arab ketika bercakap menggunakan Bahasa Inggeris. Tujuan kajian adalah untuk memahami masalah pelajar-pelajar Arab yang masih melakukan kesalahan tatabahasa ketika bercakap. Kajian ini juga bertujuan untuk menyiasat kepelbagaian strategi yang digunakan oleh responden. Dua puluh responden dipilih dari kalangan pelajar Arab di UTM, berdasarkan pengalaman mereka ketika menyertai kursus bahasa Inggeris. Data untuk kajian ini diperolehi melalui instrumen yang digunakan iaitu sesi temu bual bersama responden dan menggunakan ujian bercakap. Tujuan menggunakan dua instrumen dalam kajian ini adalah untuk memastikan kesahan dan kebolehpercayaan data. Dapatan kajian menunjukkan pelajar Arab banyak melakukan kesalahan tatabahasa ketika bercakap. Antara kesalahan tersebut adalah *subject verb agreement*, *English articles*, *prepositions*, *tenses* dan gandaan kata nama. Selain itu, dapatan kajian juga menunjukkan pelajar Arab banyak menggunakan strategi ketika bercakap. Antara strategi yang digunakan adalah pembetulan sendiri, pengesahan maklumat, menggunakan bahasa pertama dan juga mengulangi ayat. Adalah disarankan bahawa dapatan kajian ini dapat digunakan oleh pelajar Arab sebagai kesedaran terhadap masalah yang dihadapi ketika bercakap menggunakan bahasa Inggeris. Selain itu, adalah diharapkan juga bagi tenaga pengajar bahasa Inggeris untuk lebih peka terhadap masalah ini dari peringkat permulaan lagi. Kajian ini juga dapat digunakan sebagai asas kepada penggubal silabus dan kurikulum bahasa Inggeris untuk mengambilkira permasalahan percakapan yang dilakukan oleh pelajar Arab. Ini adalah bertujuan untuk memastikan pelajar-pelajar Arab boleh mengatasi masalah-masalah tersebut jika sekolah dapat mengadaptasi beberapa cara pengajaran percakapan yang sesuai dalam bahasa Inggeris. Ini dapat dilakukan berdasarkan rujukan terhadap kesalahan umum dan kesalahan spesifik yang dilakukan pelajar Arab.

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## **LIST OF ACRONYMS**

<b>CLT</b>	-	<b>Communicative Language Theory</b>
<b>EFL</b>	-	<b>English as a Foreign Language</b>
<b>ESL</b>	-	<b>English as a Second Language</b>
<b>HDL</b>	-	<b>A Coding System</b>
<b>L1</b>	-	<b>First Language</b>
<b>L2</b>	-	<b>Second Language</b>
<b>Mr. A- J</b>	-	<b>Participants from A to J</b>
<b>NL</b>	-	<b>Native Language</b>
<b>P. A- J</b>	-	<b>Participants from A to J</b>
<b>PHD</b>	-	<b>Doctor of Philosophy</b>
<b>RQS</b>	-	<b>Research Questions</b>
<b>SLA</b>	-	<b>Second Language Acquisition</b>
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## **Chapter I**

### **INTRODUCTION**

#### **1.0. Introduction**

Language learning has become an official task during our time. People from all over the world start to learn other languages because they have a curiosity to know about cultures, food, thoughts, and behaviours of other cultures. Bonham, Cifuentes and Murphy (1995: 614) state that, “language is a social creation, because we learn our first language from the people around us. Throughout life, we have expended large amounts of time and energy negotiating the meaning of words and of language structures”. In other words, people participate in the social construction of meaning as it is expressed in oral and written language. In addition, some languages become very important to be learned because they have been widely used in science and technology. One of those languages is the English language. It becomes an international language. Most universities started to teach English for decades in their faculties and some have big departments which only specialised for teaching English. Therefore, learning English has become a science in itself. A lot of theories, methods, and views emerged in learning and teaching of this language. Accordingly, some problems followed learning and teaching this language.



Any student who learns English will learn the four skills: reading, writing, speaking and listening. Speaking is one of the most important skills of communication and understanding languages. It is also one of the key components that can help students understand their teachers when they need to express their ideas related to their lessons not only through words but through their body language. Therefore, Belmonte (2001: 616) argues that “good communication is the foundation of successful relationships, both personally and professionally. But we communicate with much more than words. In fact, research shows that the majority of our communication is nonverbal. Nonverbal communication, or *body language*, includes our facial expressions, gestures, eye contact, posture, and even the tone of our voice”.

Cunningham, M. (1999) “Speaking is an interactive process of constructing meaning that involves producing, receiving and processing information. Its form and meaning depend on the context in which it occurs, including the participants themselves, their collective experiences, the physical environment, and the purposes of the speaking” (Brown, 1994: 117; Burns, & Joyce, 1997: 102).

International students have some problems with speaking. Among those students, Arab students still suffer from some problems of grammar, fluency, cultural aspects, knowledge background and physical barriers such as motivation, participation, fear, anxious, and shyness. Tanveer (2007: 15) states that the problem exists among ESL/EFL learners from beginning to more advanced levels. Even

highly advanced ESL/EFL learners feel anxious while learning and speaking English in some situations, both within and out of the classroom settings. Those learners wonder why they cannot speak English well, because their compulsive efforts do not lead to their intended performance. Therefore, such a problem can affect the process of the academic learning. In this case, students discover that they need to solve these problems by paying more attention towards their learning acquisition and getting high marks in their presentation in front of the other foreign students.

According to some orientations in English language learning, such as running courses, running English departments programs at universities and job requirements, it can be seen that Arab students insist and desire to learn foreign languages and become professionals because it is something related to superiority and prides of self-desire among their social community. Another reason, there are many foreign companies getting contracts in Arab countries, so job requirements and high salaries can be given to those who are proficient in English. These factors encourage Arab students to learn English. Abou-Chacra (2006: 28) states that “The Western industrialized countries and universities then began to find new interests in the Arab world and this was the motivation behind the establishment in Beirut such as the American University. This is another reason which leads Arab students to learn foreign languages”.

## **1.1 Background of the Study**

Anyone including me would at any time be called upon to present an idea, a recommendation, or a proposal viewpoint. This requires us to speak and communicate when we have this opportunity to express ourselves. When this happens, a great percentage will fail to do justice to the substance they have. We must understand how others see their world and what meaning they attribute to things in order to effectively communicate and connect with them, (Fisher 1999). There are some obstacles which Arab students face in speaking English.

Arab students need to think a lot before speaking. This means that it is axiomatic that Arab students at English-speaking environments have major challenges to overcome. Therefore, Arab teachers need to pay great attention in teaching such students how to think in English to help them to produce correct formal speaking. Thinking in Arabic can be regarded as a disadvantage if the speaker produces incorrect response. However, it has some advantages according to Graham (2010: 47) who argues “When we talk about thinking before you speak we are encouraging you to do a few things”. As a first step, think about the receiver, or receivers. What do you know about them, their likely response to your message (given your filters) and their level of understanding? When you have taken the time to consider this information you can aim to pitch your message at the right level for the audience.

Hoque (2008: 22) mentioned that “Another aspect of overcoming fear of mistakes is the way mistakes can be remedied. Majority of EFL teachers assume an

active role in error rectification, while learners prefer being passive and rely on teachers to point out their mistakes. However, in the long run, this approach is neither efficient nor efficacious, particularly in treating the so-called 'fossilized' errors. The contemporary emphasis on learner-centeredness and autonomy suggests that in some settings learner's self-correction of errors might be more beneficial for language learning than teacher's correction. This assumption has neither been confirmed nor disproved in the relevant literature". So it is essential that correction process should be, in Brumfit's (1980) terms, a genuine learning process by using an effective self-correction technique through which learners will become skilled mistake-recognizers.

Fluency is still vague in speaking English language in terms of culture and behaviours of people. Arab students still do not know the roots of the language which some are related to the culture. Ziesing (1992: 1) said in *The Need for Roots* in: "that little cultural knowledge is crucial important, because it enables writers and speakers to assume a starting point from which they can treat in detail what they wish to focus on. In addition, many things are alluded to with no explanation". What is fluency that Arab students really need is exactly like what was cited by Ziesing (1992: 14) as four different skills that might come under the term fluency: (a) "the ability to talk at length with few pauses", (b) "the ability to talk in coherent, reasoned, and "semantically dense" sentences", (c) "the ability to have appropriate things to say in a wide range of contexts", and (d) "the ability...to be creative and imaginative in language use".

When Arab learners speak, they think in their native language. For example, they think or construct the sentence in Arabic first and then they say it in English, so they are putting words together according to the Arabic sequence of sentences. Therefore, teachers and instructors always advise learners to think in English when they need to speak or express their emotions.

Sometimes even for Arab students who can read and write correctly, when it comes to speaking it is very difficult for them to express their deep ideas clearly in public. This is because first, they need to think a lot before the time of speaking as mentioned above. Second, making mistakes lead to feel shame in front of colleagues and teachers. Third, Arab students are not ready yet in knowing how to employ the grammar usages in their speaking. Fourth, accuracy is very important for them. When there is a chance in teaching them how to express something they cannot especially when they use grammatical form, new vocabulary, or new functional language. Finally, among Arab students there is no surprise when some become obsessive about getting their sentences right. There are some people whose outgoing nature, slapdash character or hyperactive speaking style just seems to make it difficult for them to stop for a minute and pay attention to what they are saying.

In conclusion, Arab students make mistakes because of their grammar, vocabulary, and their self confidence and. These things can easily lead to making mistakes. Also, using the grammatical rules perfectly can cause some mistakes for

students when they do not know how to use adjectives, verbs, nouns and prepositions in their right places.

## **1.2 Statement of the Problem**

Although Arab students have some academic skills, high educational aspirations, and positive attitudes toward their colleges and tutors, they face many difficulties in speaking and communication. Many students are able to understand the language, but most of them face the problem of communicating their ideas effectively because of the hitch of the lack of vocabulary. Clement (2006) states that “Many Arab students experience significant problems in daily life tasks, such as not understanding the teachers requirements, problems of face to face communication, and lack of vocabulary and knowledge which make it difficult for them to understand and communicate with others at the same time”. These problems can be shown as social habits or cognitive habits which lead to prevent some students from having self-confident when they discuss their academic issues.

Arab students are not ready yet to apply grammatical rules in their speech. According to Brown (1994: 119) “good speakers can use grammar structures accurately”. The types of mistakes indicate poor grammar among Arab students for example; first, they cannot form sentences that combine two or more complete thoughts without the proper punctuation between clauses. Second, they do not know

the sentence fragments that lack a subject or verb. Third, most of them are confused about apostrophes that indicate possession with apostrophes that indicate omitted letters. Fourth, using two negatives in one sentence to indicate the opposite of what you actually mean is still not recognized by some. Fifth, sentences with an unclear antecedent, such as the noun that a pronoun refers to is something odd for them. Finally, in speaking Arab students misplaced modifiers that either modify two separate words or appear to modify the wrong part of the sentence.

Arab students are afraid of making mistakes because of inability and lack of knowledge. This is a common habit which can be found everywhere. According to Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986: 125) “Many learners express their inability and sometimes even acknowledge their failure in learning to speak a second/foreign language. These learners may be good at learning other skills but, when it comes to learning to speak another language, they claim to have a ‘mental block’ against it”.

### **1.3 Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of the study is to investigate the problems of speaking in English language which occur among Arab students in a Malaysian higher learning institution. In particular this research is going to look at the problems of grammar, word order, and barriers of using the English language fluently in speaking. Some Arab students know and memorise a very large amount of vocabulary but they still do not use them in their speaking. It is not correct way that they only put words with

each other without concentrating on the right grammatical way of saying these words. This study also focuses on the ways which can help students and teachers to solve these problems by showing some examples which happen in real situations. Hopefully, this study will benefit a lot of students, as well as English teachers who got their first degrees in Arab countries and have little knowledge about English language. It will show some problems in speaking to be avoided in the future especially in teaching students the speaking skill.

#### **1.4 Objectives of the Study**

The objectives of the study are firstly, to know and determine the speaking problems which happen among Arab students. Secondly, it is to identify the main problems which always occur to be seen as common problems. Finally, it is to find out how students and learners can overcome these problems.

#### **1.5 Research Questions**

This study will try to answer the following research questions:

- i. What are the problems which are related to grammatical mistakes and errors in speaking English among Arab students?



- ii. What are the speaking strategies for Arab students in conveying the idea in English?
- iii. What are the problems of using vocabulary such as verbs, adjectives, nouns and adverbs in speaking English language?

### **1.6 Significance of the Study**

This study is very important because Speaking is a very important skill for all students, especially foreign students. It is one of the most influential and authoritative skills among the other language skills. Therefore, one can say that speaking is the only direct way of communication between people. If people are trained in reading, writing and listening they are being prepared for speaking as well. You cannot speak unless you are exposed to a great amount of language. This amount of language is only possible through sheer listening and reading and then writing to some extent. All skills are interconnected.

This study is also very important for all foreign students and everyone who needs to be professional in speaking. Students have to enhance this skill, because it is the only direct way of communication between people. Accordingly, the Arab students need to master this skill to help them academically especially when they interact with other foreign students, with their tutors or supervisors, colleagues in and

out of the classroom, and with government institutions in their daily procedures. This study is important because it shows some mistakes and high-lights the problems that occur among Arab and some international students.

Therefore, students have to show the ability of speaking because they need to be skilful in their study especially in speaking. For instance, they have to present their assignments to other foreigners. They also have classroom discussions which require speaking skill to describe their own knowledge and information to others. Finally, we will not neglect the significance of cultural aspects as it is one of the most crucial things which can convey messages between people through speaking and discussion.

## **1.7 Scope of the Study**

This study discusses the problems of speaking faced by Arab students who are studying in Malaysia as the only available community one can get easily. This will include different Arab nationalities who are post graduate and undergraduate students because they have an experience with learning English as most of them joined the English courses before they started their academic studies. This research also takes a look at the types of speaking problems faced by students and why these problems affect their studies such as communicating with lecturers, and classroom participations. The study undertakes **10** participants as a sample to represent the Arab students in this research. These participants will be given an interview questions to

extract more information about the problems of speaking that they used to face and may help us to detect errors and mistakes in grammar. A test of speaking also will be conducted with another **10** participants to speak about different topics.

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